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ABSTRACT

A poll of 90 top-level public relations executives in the San Francisco Bay area generated 65 usable responses to a questionnaire about their hiring practices and about the skills, educational background, and practical experiences that they seek in job applicants. The data from the questionnaire show that the ideal applicant for a public relations job will have a bachelor's degree; courses in news writing, public relations, business, and the social sciences; an ability to write and speak well; and some previous work experience in the field. Applicant attributes that the executives consider most important are attitude, writing skills, growth potential, personality, ambition, and poise. The stress that employers place on the grapevine method of circulating job leads and contacts indicates that aspiring public relations job seekers should develop professional contacts and participate in professional organizations while still in college. (RL)

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Public Relations Division

HIRING CRITERIA OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EMPLOYERS

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HIRING CRITERIA OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EMPLOYERS

Survey of employment practices in public relations finds that the successful job applicant needs strong writing skills and access to "grapevine" referrals.

Increasing numbers of recent journalism graduates are finding employment in the field of public relations. One national survey, for example, found that public relations was the second largest category of employment for graduates after daily newspaper work.[1]

In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor projects that there will be three times the number of job openings in public relations than newspaper reporting through 1985.[2] Coupled with the greater number of opportunities in public relations is an increasing number of public relations majors in our colleges and universities.[3]

Little is known, however, about the hiring practices of public relations employers. What skills and qualifications do they seek in job applicants? What kinds of course work and practical experience do they like to see on a resume? Do public relations employers utilize testing mechanisms to screen applicants? Is a woman or member of an ethnic minority more likely to be hired?

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Research Methodology

Finding the answers to these questions was the subject of a 1977 mail questionnaire to 90 top-level public relations practitioners in the San Francisco Bay area. The mailing generated 65 useable questionnaires for a response rate of 72%.

The sample was purposive in nature, rather than a random sample, because those receiving the questionnaire were selected on the basis of job titles. It was assumed that the three job title categories utilized -- (1) managers and directors of public relations, (2) partners or owners of public relations counseling firms, and (3) vice presidents of public relations or public affairs -- indicated a level of responsibility for hiring public relations personnel. Indeed, the returned questionnaires indicated that hiring decisions were made exclusively by 65% of the respondents. Another 25% indicated that they did the initial screening and made recommendations to his or her immediate supervisor.

The respondent list was compiled from the membership rosters of the Peninsula and San Francisco chapters of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the San Francisco Public Relations Round Table. The questionnaires were anonymous and percentages were tabulated by machine scoring techniques.

The majority of the respondents were affiliated with business and industry (43%) or a counseling agency (37%). A breakdown of titles shows that 55% were managers or directors of public relations, 22% were partners or owners of counseling firms, and 20% were vice presidents. The remaining 3% did not answer the question.

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Due to the nature of the survey, the results probably are skewed toward the attitudes and policies of large counseling agencies or large businesses with well-defined public relations departments. The findings, however, are instructive and a degree of generalizing about public relations employment practices across the nation can be made.

Findings

Announcement of Job Openings

Table 1 indicates that most job vacancies in the public relations field are filled by the "grapevine" process -- employers circulate job openings among themselves or announce positions at PRSA or Round Table meetings of practitioners. Indeed, the grapevine is the most frequently used method of finding applicants for availabe jobs. The second most frequent method of filling jobs is the review of resumes that are received.

If advertising is utilized, announcements are most likely found in the Wall Street Journal or metropolitan newspapers. Trade magazines like Public Relations Journal, Editor & Publisher and Advertising Age are also used to some extent, including regional trade publications (MAC is widely used on the West Coast). Unlike engineering or business recruiters, public relations employers don't visit the campus to conduct interviews.

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Table 1

How Job Openings Are Filled Most Frequently (multiple responses)

65%	Grapevine referrals
35%	Resumes received
20%	Internal transfer or promotion
19%	Advertisements in various publications
2%	Contact former student interns

Media Utilized To Announce Job Openings (multiple responses)

39%	Wall Street Journal
35%	Metropolitan newspapers in the area
16%	Trade publications
11%	Employment agencies

Recruiting Visits To Campuses

97%	No
3%	Yes

Academic Background Preferred By Employers

The overwhelming majority of public relations employers (77%) regard the four-year bachelor's degree as a prerequisite for entry-level jobs in the field. Table 2 also shows that employers generally prefer applicants who have completed courses in such subjects as (1) news and feature writing, (2) public relations, (3) publicity, (4) the social sciences, (5) finance and accounting, (6) business administration and (7) economics

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Table 2

Level of Education Necessary For Entry-Level Jobs	
77%	Four-year undergraduate degree
11%	No educational minimum required
6%	Some college
2%	Master's degree
4%	No response

College Course Work Preferred By Employers (multiple responses)	
86%	News and feature writing
65%	Principles of public relations
38%	Social sciences
36%	Finance and accounting
35%	Publicity techniques
28%	Economics
28%	Business administration
24%	Editing and layout
15%	Speech communication
12%	Radio-television
11%	Advertising
3%	Photography
3%	Marketing
3%	Engineering
2%	Science
11%	Other (English, liberal arts, home economics, etc.)

In general, business courses (finance, accounting, management) rank high on the list of preferred courses -- even higher than editing, broadcasting, advertising and photography. On the other hand, marketing receives a relatively low ranking -- somewhat surprising given its relationship to programs of product promotion and publicity.

The high ranking of business courses, according to many respondents, comes from the belief that public relations personnel must thoroughly understand the workings of business and industry to do their job effectively. One respondent wrote, "One must be able to understand a financial statement before he can write an annual report." [4]

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Affirmative Action Policies

The majority of respondents express no preference on the basis of sex or race. There is a tendency, however, to hire women or members of an ethnic minority if they are just as qualified as male or white job applicants. Table 3 gives the breakdown of employer responses.

Table 3

Weight Assigned To Affirmative Action Policies When Reviewing A Female Candidate

69%	No preference on basis of sex
23%	More likely to hire a female if as qualified as a male
5%	Less likely to hire a female if as qualified as a male
3%	No response

Weight Assigned To Affirmative Action Policies When Reviewing A Minority Candidate

62%	No preference on basis of race
26%	More likely to hire if as qualified as white applicant
5%	Less likely to hire if as qualified as white applicant
5%	More likely to hire even if not as qualified as a white
2%	Less likely to hire even if more qualified as a white

One employer said his decision regarding the hiring of women depended "on the job to some extent." A manager of public relations for a counseling firm adds, "But client and product/service may have some bearing on choice," regarding both questions. A partner in a counseling agency that primarily handles food accounts expresses a preference for women -- "I have not yet found a man who had the combination of home economics and public relations."

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Major Hiring "Yardsticks" For Public Relations Applicants

Public relations employers were asked to weight on a scale from "a lot" to "little or none" what criteria they used to evaluate an applicant for an entry-level position.[5] Table 4 shows the breakdown of total responses.

Yardsticks that garnered 70% or more of the employers' major consideration were (1) attitude, (2) writing skills, (3) growth potential, (4) personality, (5) ambition and (6) poise. Other "yardsticks" that received "a lot" of attention were (1) cooperativeness, (2) speaking ability, (3) appearance, (4) related part-time or full-time work in the field, (5) knowledge of mass media, (6) experience on a publication and (7) references.

Writing skills were one of the highest rated, receiving "a lot" of emphasis by 95% of the respondents. One employer wrote, "Writing ability and knowledge of journalistic style is the overwhelming criteria by which we judge an applicant." On Table 2, more than 80% of the respondents said that news and feature writing courses were at the top of preferred academic work.

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Table 4

Primary Hiring "Yardsticks" for Public Relations Job Applicants As Weighted by Employers in the San Francisco Bay area

Categories	A Lot	Some	Little or None	No Response
PERSONAL				
Native of area	8%	22%	65%	5%
Appearance	62%	34%	0%	4%
Personality	77%	20%	0%	3%
Persistence in applying	15%	40%	38%	7%
Marital status	5%	14%	74%	7%
Ambition	71%	25%	0%	4%
Desire to work specifically for your firm	35%	52%	8%	5%
EXPERIENCE				
Related campus activities	20%	60%	15%	5%
Unrelated part-time work during college	5%	45%	43%	7%
Related part-time or full-time work in college	62%	31%	3%	4%
Grade point average	17%	65%	8%	10%
Experience on a newspaper (other than college)	57%	42%	1%	0%
Salary history	14%	45%	38%	3%
BACKING				
References	55%	37%	5%	3%
Letters of recommendation	11%	58%	25%	6%
Family of staff member	3%	20%	63%	14%
Friend of staff member	8%	37%	46%	9%
Grapevine referral	37%	46%	15%	2%
TRAITS				
Writing skills	95%	5%	0%	0%
Speaking ability	65%	29%	2%	4%
Poise	71%	23%	3%	3%
Cooperativeness	69%	23%	5%	3%
Knowledge of your company	6%	48%	2%	44%
Knowledge of mass media	58%	37%	0%	5%
Screening tests	12%	46%	29%	13%
Specialized production skills	17%	57%	20%	6%
Attitude	97%	3%	0%	0%
Growth potential	88%	11%	0%	1%

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A comparison of Table 4 with a similar survey of news executives for 52 APME dailies by Edward J. Trayes (JQ, Autumn 1976) reveals some similarities between public relations employers and newspaper employers. Both groups, for example, record a similar percentage of emphasis (50% or more said "a lot") on writing skills, cooperativeness, growth potential, ambition and personality.

Public relations employers, however, record a higher percentage of emphasis than newspaper employers on such yardsticks as appearance (62% vs. 42%), speaking ability (65% vs. 46%) and knowledge of mass media (58% vs. 20%). Newspaper employers, on the other hand, gave greater emphasis than public relations employers to experience on a newspaper (84% vs. 57%), the job applicant being a native of the area (27% vs. 8%) and results of placement tests (23.9% vs. 12%).

Employment Tests

A large number of employers still rely on basic interviews and intuition when hiring a job applicant in public relations. Formalized testing or screening procedures are still not the rule in the field. Indeed, Table 4 shows "a lot" of consideration for such abstract qualities as attitude, personality, poise, ambition, cooperativeness and growth potential. Only 12% give "a lot" of weight to testing results.

Of the employers that do utilize some testing mechanism, the most prevalent one used is a writing and editing test. Grammar and spelling tests are utilized somewhat less frequently, while testing for organizational ability (solution to a public relations case problem) is even behind psychological tests. Table 5, although multiple responses, gives some indication of pre-employment tests used.

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Table 5

Utilization of Pre-Employment Tests (multiple responses)

46%	Do not use any testing devices
40%	Utilize a writing and editing test
25%	Utilize a spelling and grammar test
15%	Utilize psychological tests
9%	Organizational capacity (case problems)
5%	No response

A director of public relations for a business indicated that he uses a testing device for all other positions except public relations. It is assumed that he was referring to secretarial positions in the department. A vice president of a counseling firm indicated that psychological tests were administered to all job applicants. Many respondents merely noted that no test device per se was used, but it was customary to review samples of the applicant's work.

Salary Levels

The salary level in the public relations field for a recent college graduate averages between $7,500 and $10,500 annually, according to almost half of the employers on the survey. After five years of experience, a competent person should be earning anywhere from $14,000 to $20,000 annually. Table 6 summarizes the salary categories by percentage of response

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Table 6

Annual Salary For A Recent College Graduate	
6%	Under $7,500
23%	$7,501 to $9,000
25%	$9,001 to $10,500
12%	$10,501 to $12,000
9%	Over $12,000
25%	No response

Annual Salary Range For Person With Five Years Experience	
6%	$12,001 to $14,000
22%	$14,001 to $16,000
26%	$16,001 to $18,000
15%	$18,001 to $20,000
1%	Over $20,001
16%	No response

The vice president of a public relations agency noted that "Salaries often depend on the size of the account and its profitability." A director of public relations for a business says, "Salary level at five years depends upon employee taking promotions, which often require movement to other parts of the country. We ask entry level people to take special training and advise them that advancement requires relocation."

The beginning salaries in public relations, as reported by employers in the San Francisco area, are comparable with a national study conducted by the Newspaper Fund. It reported average salaries for recent graduates in public relations as being $10,400 annually; average beginning salaries on newspapers were $7,800 annually.[6]

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Conclusion

The ideal applicant for a public relations job will have (1) a four-year undergraduate degree, (2) courses in news writing, public relations, business and the social sciences, (3) an ability to write and speak well, (4) some previous work experience in the field and (5) access to the "grapevine" of available jobs. He or she should also have ambition, a good personality and a healthy attitude about public relations as a career. At least this is the composite profile of what public relations employers are seeking in job applicants.

The value of the "grapevine" for job leads and contacts cannot be overemphasized. Public relations employers tend to circulate job vacancies among themselves and ask other practitioners to recommend qualified applicants. Aspiring job seekers, while in college, should develop a number of professional contacts in an effort to tap the "grapevine." One method is to attend chapter meetings of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Sending resumes to various employers also has some merit.

Advertisements have limited potential because the majority of jobs are never advertised. In addition, employers report that any ad in the San Francisco dailies generates about 300 applications. In such a situation, recent graduates with limited experience are at a disadvantage. Public relations employers seldom, if ever, recruit on campus.

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Although employers still seek applicants with an academic background in journalism, increasing emphasis is also being placed on courses in economics, finance, accounting and management. This perhaps reflects the evolution of public relations from a news bureau and publicity function to more of a management and policy making function within business and industry. To many employers, the answer is more simple. It's only common sense that a public relations person should have a thorough understanding of economics and business in order to do his or her job effectively. Large counseling firms, like Hill & Knowlton, are even finding some advantage in hiring staff with backgrounds in environmental science, geography, computer programming and Arabic -- depending on the agency's roster of clients.

Affirmative action policies are also being felt in the public relations profession, and many employers are consciously attempting to hire more women for higher levels of responsibility. The profession, like newsroom work, remains dominated by white males. Efforts to hire more women and members of ethnic minorities, at the present time, are most prevalent in industries that have federal contracts.

Most hiring criteria in public relations, however, still remain somewhat subjective and difficult to measure in any meaningful way. This study shows that such "yardsticks" as personality, attitude, ambition, poise and cooperativeness still carry "a lot" of weight; and it is often assumed that the applicant can write and speak well. Employers, for the most part, hire personnel on the basis of hunches and intuition. Trayes, in his study of newspaper executives, also found the same trait in newspaper executives.

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Given the increasing interest of journalism students in public relations, and the attractive entry-level salaries, employers are in the position of hiring the best candidates possible. This, unfortunately, doesn't always happen when the hiring criteria are somewhat subjective and lacks standardized forms of measurement. There is a ring of truth that a woman in public relations can be hired on the basis of glamour instead of grammar; and the "grapevine" referral system places qualified candidates without "connections" at a disadvantage.

Footnotes on next page .....

Footnotes

[1]Thomas E. Engleman, "National Job Survey of Recent Journalism Graduates," Copy of survey results provided by The Newspaper Fund, Princeton, N.J. Fall 1976. Of the graduates working in journalistic fields, it was found that 16.8% went to work for daily newspapers. Public relations was second with 10.9%.

[2]Occupational Handbook in Brief, prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) p. 10 Labor experts expect 6,500 openings annually in public relations as compared to 2,200 in newspaper reporting. The report notes, "Employment expected to increase (in public relations) about as fast as average for all occupations as organizations expand their public relations efforts. However, keen competition for beginning jobs as glamourous nature of the occupation attracts many applicants."

[3]Paul V. Peterson, "Journalism Schools Report Record 65,962 Enrollment," Journalism Educator, January 1978, p. 7. Peterson writes, "The largest growth of percentage figures (among the sequences) was registered in the area of public relations, this year reporting 4,972 such students (8.2%) compared with 3,480 (5.8%) in 1976, and 3,493 (5.4%) in 1975." Albert Walker, writing in the Spring 1976 issue of Public Relations Review, reports that 320 colleges and universities now offer at least one course in public relations.

[4]The emphasis on business courses may be reflective of the fact that 43% of the respondents represented a public relations department within a business or industry. Another 37% of the respondents were members of counseling firms -- primarily serving business clients. The affiliation of the respondents is similar to national membership figures in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Individuals from business and industry constitute 41% of the membership while employees of counseling firms constitute 27% of the national membership.

[5]Edward J. Traves, "Hiring and Promotion Practices: A Survey of 52 APME Dailies, Journalism Quarterly, Autumn 1976, pp. 540-544. The "yardsticks" used were adopted and modified from the list compiled by Trayes for his study.

[6]Public Relations News, April 11, 1977, p. 1. The Newspaper Fund found that the average starting salary in public relations was $191 to $200 weekly. For newspaper reporters, the starting salary was $141 to $150 weekly. For purposes of compiling an annual salary base, the highest figure in each category was multiplied by 52 weeks.